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The Duality of the Corporate Parenting Role: A Delicate Balancing Act

Kristina Moodie & Debbie Nolan

Abstract

This piece discusses the complexity of responding to incidents of offending behaviour in children's residential provision and the duality of roles experienced by our frontline corporate parents and residential childcare workers, in doing so. It draws on the findings of research into the decision making of such staff in responding to offending behaviour, as detailed in the report *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, Moodie & Nolan, 2016. This research addressed knowledge gaps about offending in residential childcare in Scotland. More critically, it helped to illuminate and better understand the decision-making process by giving voice to practitioners' experience about what it is like to have to make that often split second decision of how to react to offending behaviour. What we found was that there were multiple, often irreconcilable, factors influencing decision-making and tensions involved, which have been differentiated below.

Keywords

Residential childcare, criminalisation, decision-making, complexity

Corresponding author:

Kristina Moodie, [Workplace] Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice

kristina.moodie@strath.ac.uk

The `Corporate' in parent

Staff were acutely aware of their roles and responsibilities as corporate parents, and the desire to provide as good quality and homely an experience as possible for the children in their care was tangible. However, this aspiration is tempered with the reality that staff are not the children's parents, nor is a children's house a typical family home:

We are corporate parents but it's not realistic, it's a double edged sword, in my house I wouldn't have six kids aged 11 to 17 and you wouldn't have a shift pattern of nine staff and social workers around ... it's 12 and a half hours on the floor, people can get tired, burned down and make silly choices and say the wrong things (Residential Childcare Worker).

Moreover, respondents were aware that this couldn't help but result in different responses to offending behaviour than would be made in a family home, feeling at times that they were being unfairly viewed for this. For example, in perceived criticism faced for contacting the police while being expected to quickly address such behaviour, even though this had often been learned or developed as a coping strategy over many years:

I hear about offending all [the] time... but that behaviour was prevalent before they came in here. We have to deal with that when they come in here, and we can't do that overnight. I don't know what people expect us to do (Residential Childcare Worker).

I ask myself 'what would senior management think is an appropriate response?'... I would like to think it's okay to get it wrong, rather than I hope I don't get it wrong (Residential Childcare Worker).

This situation was further complicated by the duality of the children's house as a home but also a place of work. For the young people this place as their home needs to be affirmed at every stage. Particularly when they are distressed or acting out, home is the one place individuals should feel most safe. But this has to include all the young people living there and simultaneously workers do have a range of rights at work, including to be safe themselves. This duality of home and work place and corporate parent can be difficult to reconcile:

I have rights as a worker and a human. If someone has been assaulted or could potentially be assaulted I have the right to contact the police just as anyone does (Residential Childcare Worker).

The dual responsibilities to the young people and their futures

Residential workers as corporate parents have a responsibility to the present and future outcomes of every young person they support, as per guidance from the

Scottish Government in 2015. In terms of the present, young people will often have been placed in their care as a place of safety, either as a means of protecting the young person from the behaviour of others or indeed their own. It was therefore evident during the interviews that ensuring as far as possible safety of all the young people they had responsibilities to, as well as to each other as colleagues, was a paramount concern. However, ensuring immediate safety was far from straightforward and could present a range of conundrums.

As a result of police contact, young people could become known to and enter formal systems, and this could be equally true of system contact for welfare reasons, such as missing person reports, as for offending behaviour. The theory of labelling predicts that when an individual receives the official label of 'offender' this affects both the individual's self-concept and the reaction of others around them, resulting in the further adoption of that role and therefore subsequent offending (Farrington, 1977). Similarly, 30 years later The Edinburgh Study took a longitudinal examination of offending among young people and identified the impact of entering criminal justice systems arguing: 'the deeper a child penetrates the formal system, the less likely he or she is to desist from offending' (Mcara and Mcvie, 2007, p. 315). Thus by the very nature of the response to promote and maintain the safety of young people, the impact on their future outcomes could be negative.

Moreover, in terms of supporting children's development, all risks cannot be removed and risk aversion is recognised as having an adverse effect on future outcomes. The need to recognise what is age and stage appropriate behaviour and that of 'typical' teenagers, while being aware that these are young people who are being scrutinised more than most teenagers are likely to be, are additional complicating factors. Therefore, the balance between achieving safety and managing developmentally appropriate risk-taking is a difficult task.

Staff were mindful of the long-term impact of police responding to offending and potential subsequent charge and conviction for the young person's future. As a result, it is unsurprising that throughout interviews they were clear that police contact and the criminalisation of young people was the option of last resort, although the data suggests that there is still disproportionate police involvement, particularly with regards to incidents of vandalism.

Staff were acutely aware of the negative outcomes of young people leaving care with a criminal record and the impact of this on future education, employment, training, and wider opportunities. Yet coupled with this was their acknowledged role in preparing young people for their future and the weight of teaching young people that behaviour has consequences. In doing so, respondents were mindful that young people needed to understand what behaviours would be acceptable and unacceptable beyond the parameters of the children's house and that would result in police involvement. Workers argued that where this was the case, police involvement could in fact have an important role in developing this

understanding. Moreover, they would rather the young person experience those consequences within the relative security of the Children's Hearings System than in adult court.

I met a boy who is now in adult court and he said 'you failed me when I was younger by protecting me from it ... I didn't learn much as a child', but we are trying to protect (Residential Childcare Worker).

The dual role of acting as carer and controller

The traditional quandary of care and control was evident during interviews but this was further complicated by the inability to separate these roles and to reconcile their impact on decision making in respondent's heads. It is clear that workers have a huge level of care, compassion, empathy, and understanding for, and of, the young people in their care. But as a result the personal and emotional costs of the dual care and control role are significant. Recognising and supporting staff to process and manage the personal impact of making these hard choices is key.

We are between a rock and a hard place... It's really difficult for staff who care a lot for young people and see them in crisis like, that the last thing [we] want to do is call police but at times [are] backed into a corner. If we don't follow procedures and someone gets injured ... it's about keeping ourselves right... It is very difficult ... it's emotional for everybody, but young people are our main focus (Residential Childcare Worker).

Moreover, relationships and relationship-based care are of central importance in meeting young people's needs. For young people who have already experienced often multiple adversities that resulted in them being placed in care, they often have very negative experiences of adults, relationships and being 'cared for'. These relationships are often difficult to build, inherently fragile and in need of constant reinforcement. Yet, when the carer has the option or indeed the inclination to involve the police in response to behaviour, with the range of implications this can bring (as detailed above) this can't help but create a relationship imbalance and indeed schism in that trust and subsequent relationship.

Future thinking

The young people who make up the looked-after population are one of the most vulnerable groups in society. The behaviour with which some of them may choose to communicate their pain, anger or frustration may appear as antisocial or damaging, but it's important to remember that for many, this is the only language they know and what they really need is a consistent, loving and therefore safe response from the adults around them. Something, that it was clear from many of the responses from this study, residential workers were

working very hard to give them. In doing so, the skills of staff and in supporting young people to understand the nuances of relationships and as necessary restoring relationships, as well as the reasoning for decision-making in responding to behaviours, is key.

Put simply, the job of residential care worker is not an easy one. It can be challenging, perhaps akin to managing spinning plates. What was stark in interviewing many of the residential workers was the sheer quantity of issues and pros and cons they weigh up in making the decision to involve the police, situations where often an immediate response is needed and the stakes are high. It was also telling that in reflecting on this thinking there was still a sense of making sense of the choices. Interestingly, the disparity in staff self-reporting that the police are rarely involved compared with the reality of police involvement underscores the importance of sharing ongoing and robust data, particularly to highlight areas of good or poor practice.

It is hoped that the recent report and this piece has helped to illuminate not just the complexities and daily balancing act experienced but also the fact that removal of discretion in this aspect of residential childcare is not realistic, not practical and indeed not possible. Sometimes calling the police to an incident will absolutely be the most appropriate response. It is important we can learn from what workers have stated aids this decision-making process and enables them to feel supported and empowered to make the right decision. This includes having a positive, shared, supportive, and respectful organisational culture; access to a range of managerial and colleague supports; and ongoing investment in, and the prioritisation of, staff training, induction and development. To support this, CYCJ and STAF are partnering to support the local and national practical implementation of these findings. If this is something you or your organisation are interested in participating in, please contact the authors of this piece.

About the authors

Kristina Moodie kristina.moodie@strath.ac.uk is a research associate, and Debbie Nolan deborah.nolan@strath.ac.uk is a practice development advisor, in the Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice (www.cycj.org.uk) at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland.

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